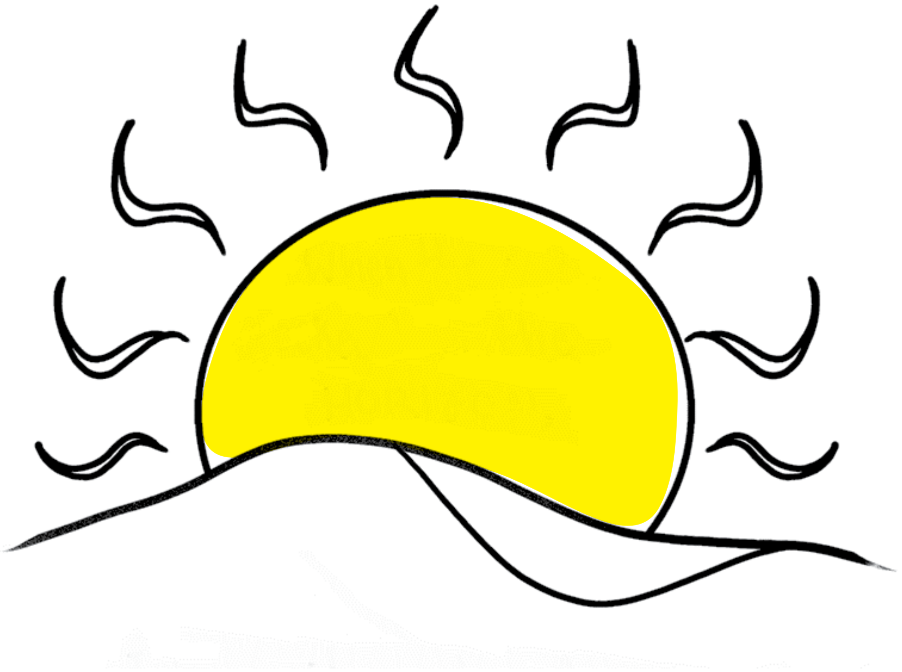
# THE DATE TREE



Written and illustrated by Maitha Almarri

المجلس الأعلى للأمومة والطفولة
THE SUPREME COUNCIL FOR
Motherhood & Childhood



When the sun peeked up from behind the horizon, I knew it was time for school.



Starting a new school made me feel nervous, excited, stressed, scared, sad, and happy in no particular order.





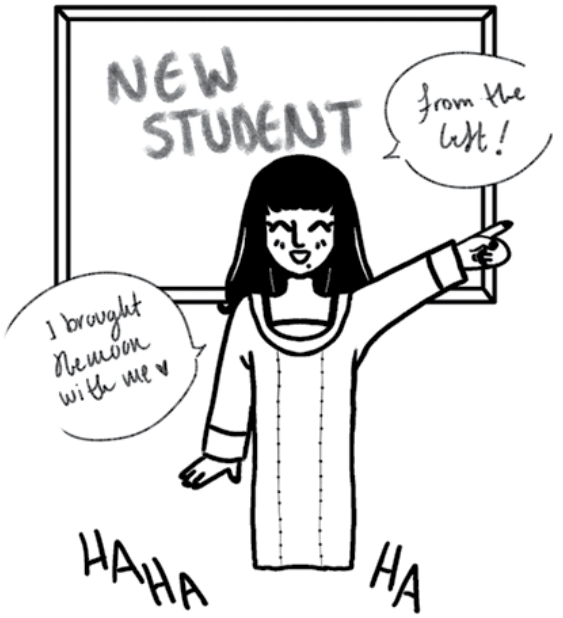
When I got to school that morning, I smiled at as many people as I could... I counted ten people, I ran out of fingers after that.

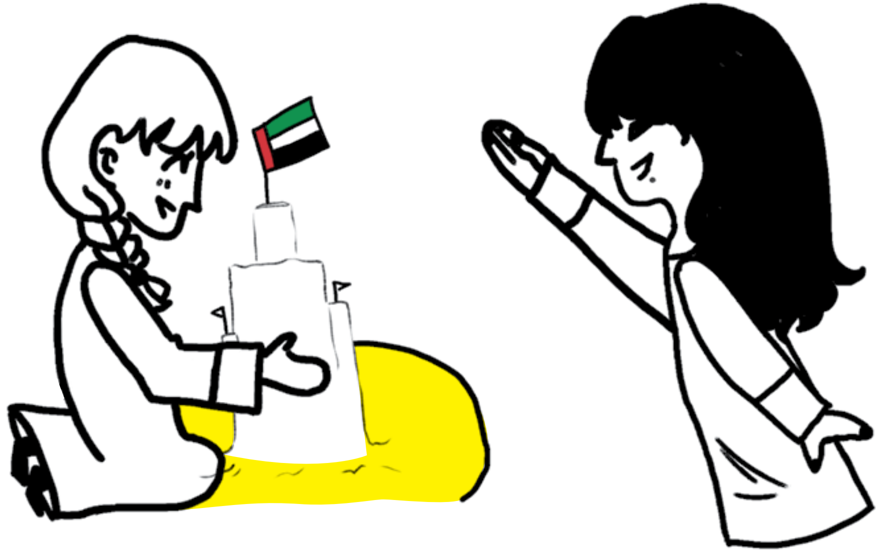



My teacher was kind, she had me stand in front of my class and tell them my name and where I moved from.

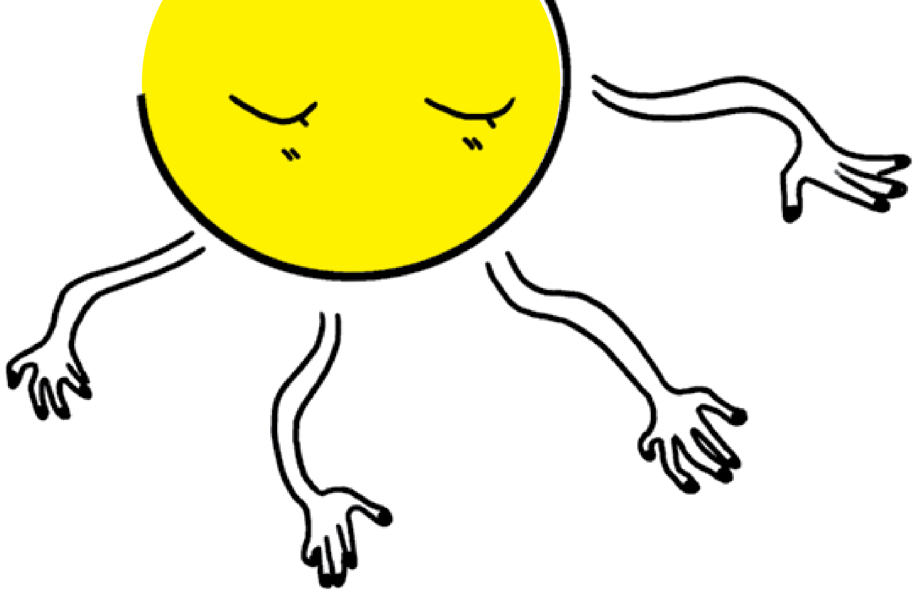



I told them I came from the left.
I also told them the moon
followed me in my car.
I said that I brought the moon
to them from my town, and they
laughed with pointed fingers.
I think maybe they like me.

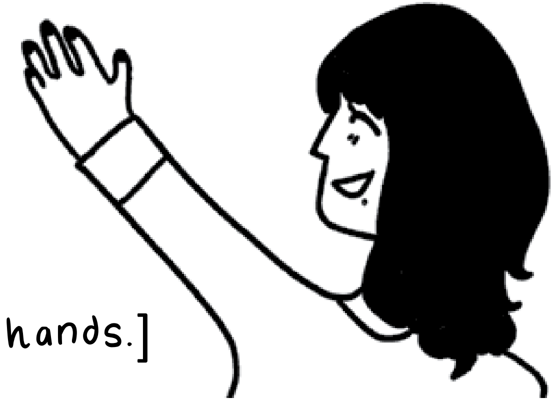




At recess I played with the other kids. We made castles in the sand. One of the kids accidentally stepped into my castle. I said that it was okay and asked if I could join someone else's castle building. No one said yes but that was fine, I don't think I would have wanted someone else to build my sandcastle. They wouldn't do it like me.



My mother came to pick me up, I said that I smiled and played and studied hard. She said she was proud of me. I went home, watching the sun smile down at me, his many hands waving. I waved back.



[sunrays look like hands.]



The first week felt good.
The kids were nice and we played a lot at recess.
I studied hard, too; my teacher said I was a smart kid.
I smiled at her when she gave me a sticker.




One of the boys asked me if he could see the sticker, I told him of course. He stuck the star on the back of his hand and ran away. I guess he just wanted a sticker.
I let him have it, because that's what nice people do.




The second week was less nice.

The teacher told us we could bring one of our toys in to show to the class. I asked her if a book counted as a toy. She said yes. So I brought my book.

When she finally called my name and asked me to come up to the front, I proudly held up my book and told the class I had finished it three times. My teacher said that was impressive. I beamed at her.




But one of the kids pointed and laughed.
He said it was a kid's book.
He was right, it was a kid's book, and I was a kid. What was the joke?
The teacher told him to be quiet.

Later on, I put my book in my cubby.

When I came back at the end of the day to put it into my bag, I found it torn and wet and ruined. I wanted to cry but I didn't; I loved that book. I just hoped it was an accident.



I was scared.
I didn't tell my mother.



The third week was even less nice.

The kids didn't want to play with me at break, I didn't know why.
They didn't tell me why when I asked, only pointed and laughed.
I didn't understand, but decided to just play by myself.



When we were solving our math worksheet, someone threw a piece of paper at my head. It was crumpled.
When I unfolded it, I found that someone had called me stupid.




I wasn't stupid; my mother and teacher said so themselves.
When I turned around to see who threw it, I couldn't find anyone who I thought would.

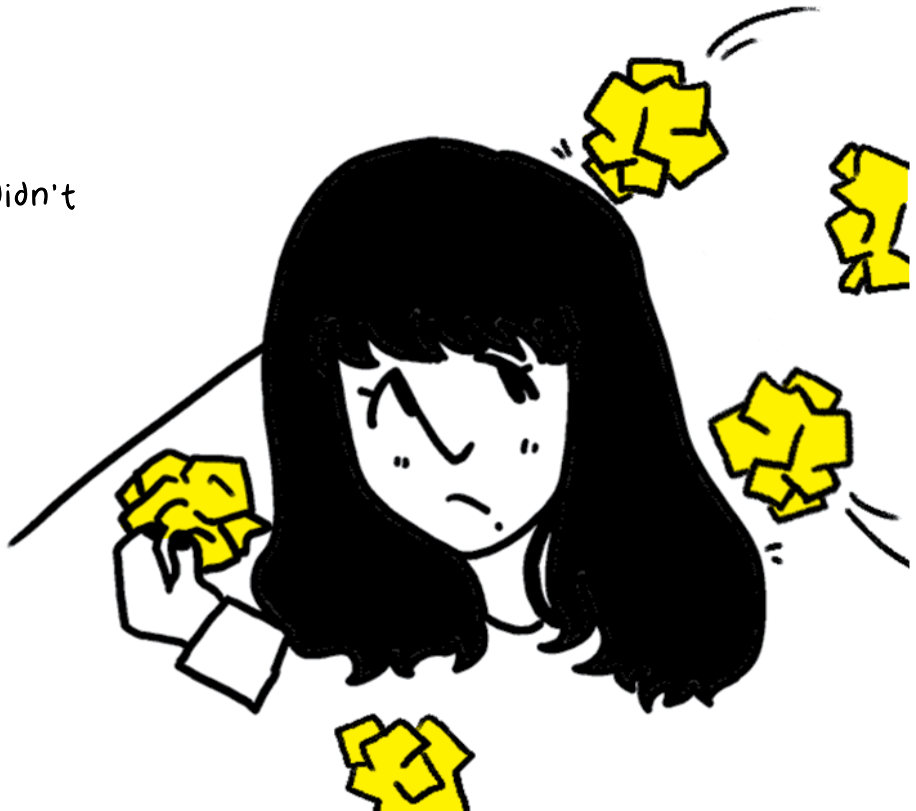
The fourth week was the worst.

When I walked in the hall, someone called me a bad name.
I tried to ignore it.
When I sat in class, more crumpled papers were tossed at me.
I tried to ignore it.
When I went to recess, no one wanted to play with me.
I tried to ignore it.



By the fifth week, no one talked to me at all.

I didn't understand.
The names got worse and the papers increased.
I didn't understand why, but I didn't think they liked me anymore.



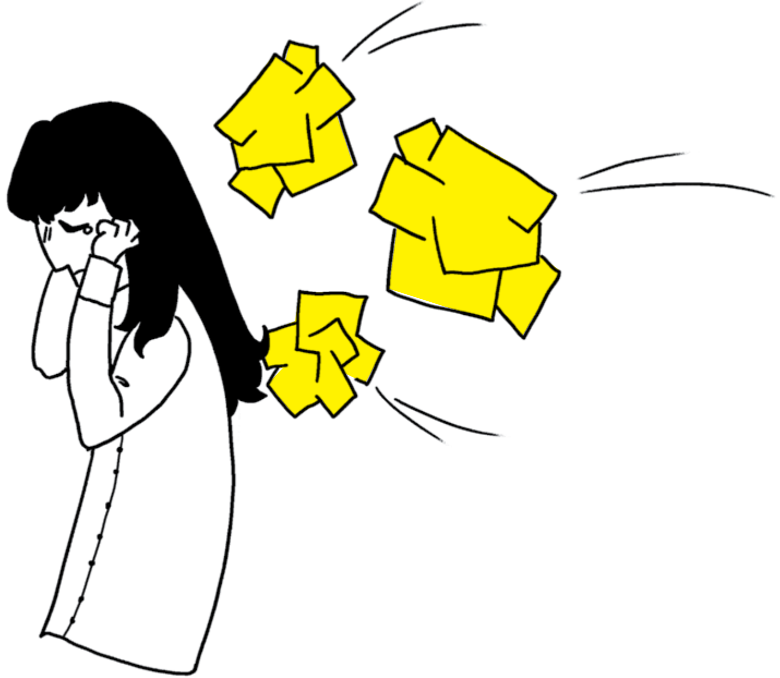
One day, when I got home, I started crying. I couldn't hold the tears back no matter what I tried.

My mother held me tightly and I cried louder.
I didn't like crying, so I tried hard not to.
But the tears were stronger than me, and I felt weak.



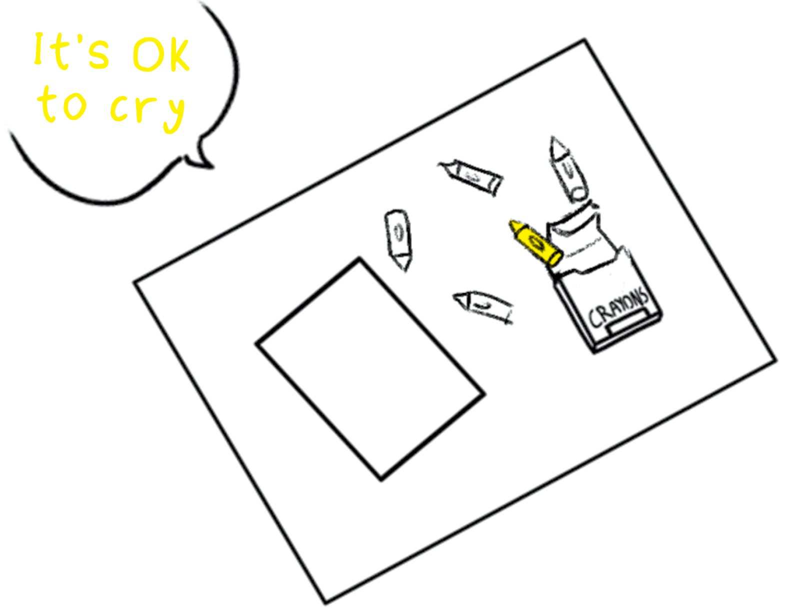
I thought maybe it was because kids kept throwing papers at me. Maybe that made me lose my strength.

It didn't matter anymore, because whatever was left of my strength was gone now and I couldn't stop the tears.
I told my mother why I was crying.



She smiled and put a piece of paper and a box of crayons in front of me on the kitchen table. That was reassuring.

She grabbed the brown crayon and drew a person, it looked like someone in my class.
I think.
Then she drew another person.
I think that person was me.



She said, "Sometimes, kids are mean." I nodded at her, though I didn't fully understand it.

Then she drew a bubble above the other kid's head. She wrote some bad words in it.

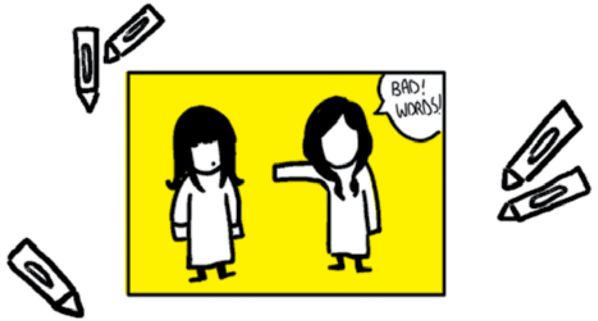
"And sometimes, kids say mean things without understanding why." She explained.

That made no sense.

She explained, "Maybe because that's what they were taught. Or, maybe because they think it's funny. Or they just don't know any better."

She drew tears in my eyes. "And that makes others sad and they start crying."

I felt embarrassed.




"It's okay to cry," she said "but it's not okay to make others cry, especially when you don't know why you're doing it." I nodded again, that made a little more sense.

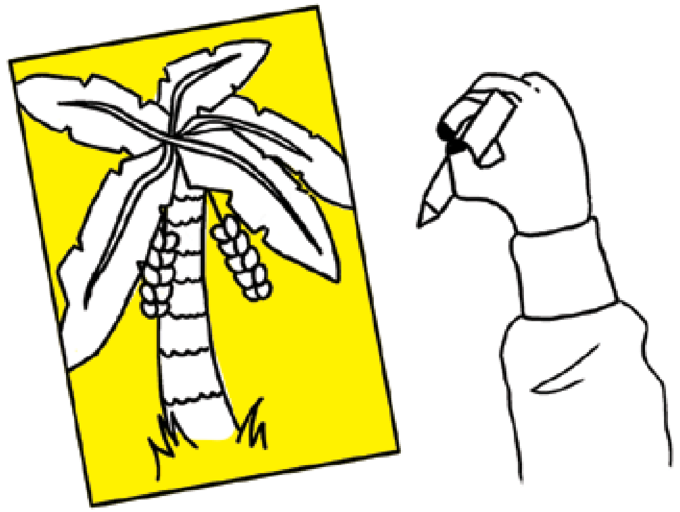
"So, then, the kids don't wanna be mean? They just are saying what they think is right?" I asked.

My mother gave me a smile that made me feel proud. "Exactly," she nodded, "because that is what they're taught. Parents play a big role in how their kids behave."



She pulled out another piece of paper and on this one, she drew a big palm tree with thick roots with lots of dates growing on it.

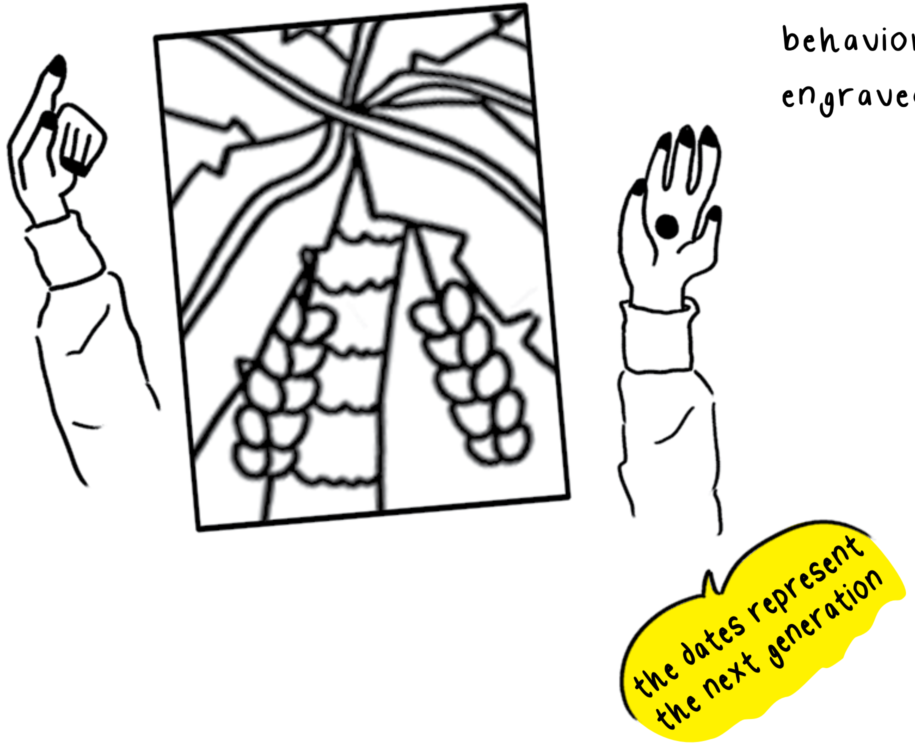
"Look at this tree, let's pretend it's a parent. The roots are the behaviors the parents know and learned, these are what they'll pass down to their children." Here, she moved her finger from pointing at the roots to the dates, circling them.





She tapped one date. "Let's say this is one of the kids in your class. He was taught by his parents," she moved back to the roots, "that he should behave a certain way, and say certain things, and naturally, the child will do what his parents taught him." She removed her hand and looked at me. "Do you understand?"

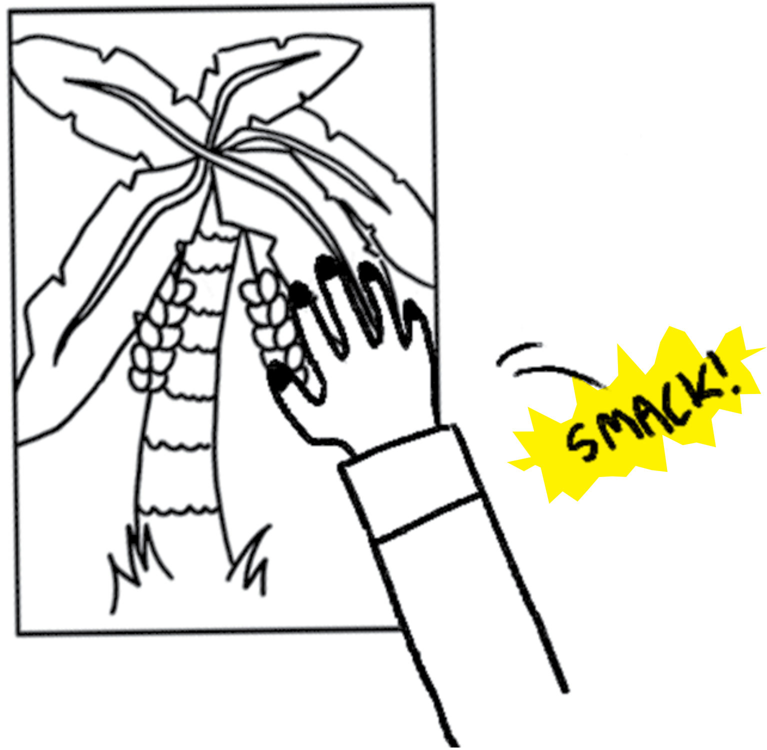
I gave her a nod, the tree made things much clearer.



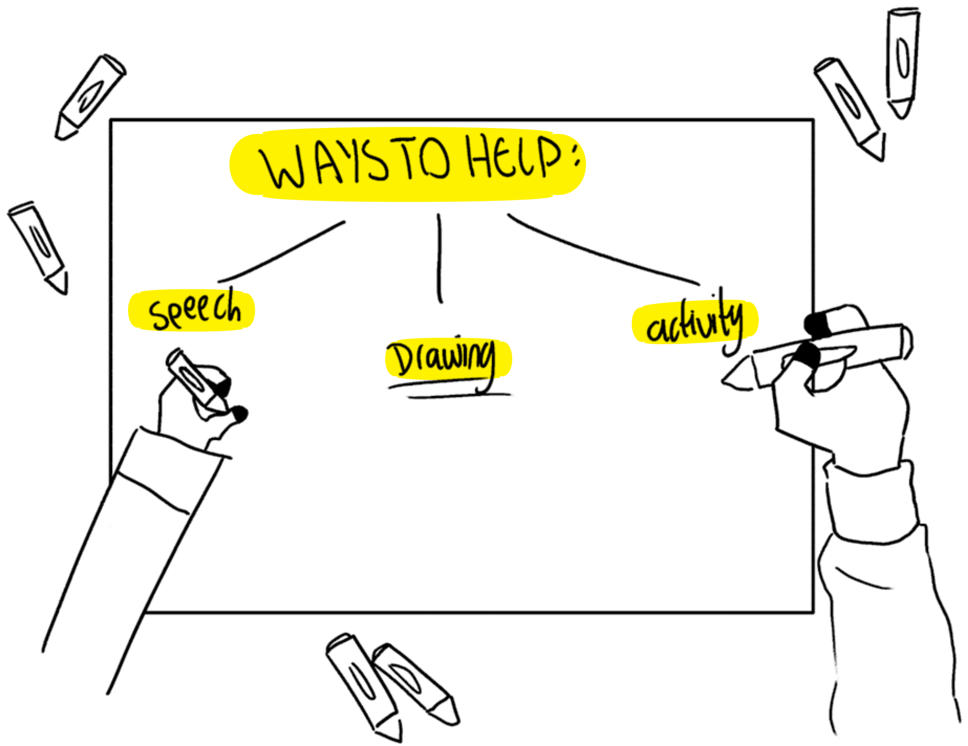

"After the child grows up and has kids of his own, he'll teach his kids to behave in the exact same way, unless someone can intercept those behaviors before they get too engraved in his brain."

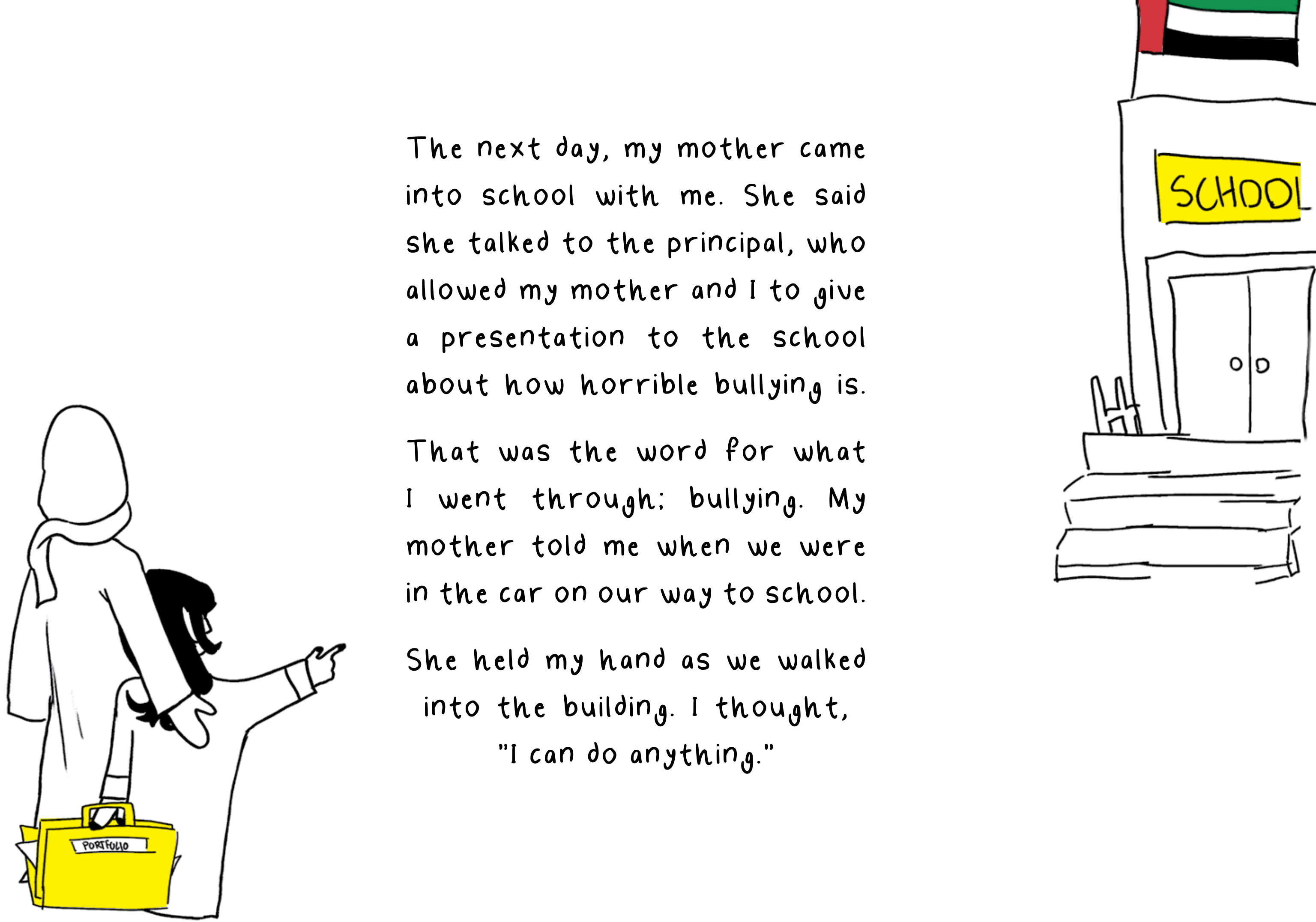
I took a moment to think about what she said.

"We have to help." I concluded, slamming my hand onto the tree diagram.
My mother nodded.



We spent the rest of the night finding ways we could explain to the kids in my class why what they were doing was bad. I decided that I would show them just how much they hurt me; I wouldn't be afraid.



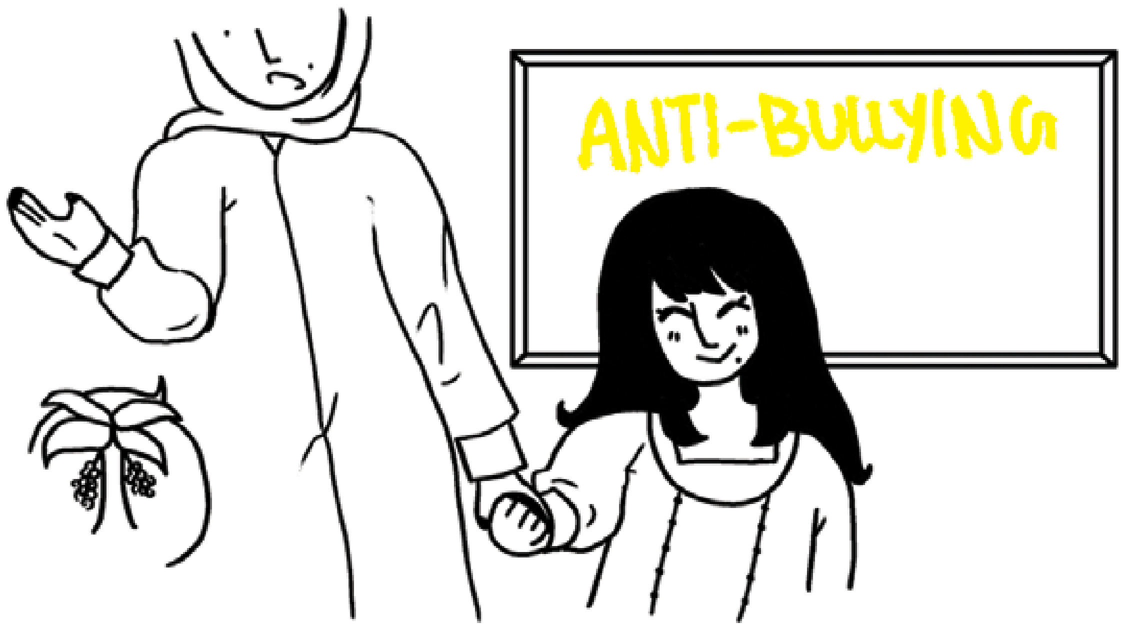




The next day, my mother came into school with me. She said she talked to the principal, who allowed my mother and I to give a presentation to the school about how horrible bullying is.

That was the word for what I went through: bullying. My mother told me when we were in the car on our way to school.

She held my hand as we walked into the building. I thought, "I can do anything."

When I stood in front of the class, it felt the same as the first day I came, but somehow different. I think it was because my mother was standing next to me.



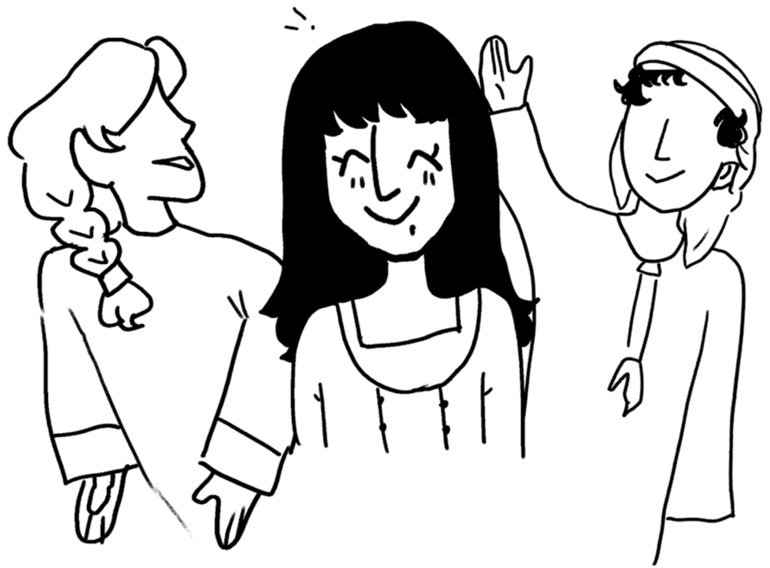

She started explaining. I didn't pay too much attention since I already knew this stuff, I watched my classmates instead. I saw that most of them weren't that focused, until my mother pulled up the drawing of the tree she showed me last night. She displayed it on the projector so that everyone could see. I thought she looked a little bit like my teacher.



After that, the kids leaned into their desks in curiosity. I felt proud. My mother then turned and let me explain the tree. I told them how much they hurt me, and most of them really did look sorry. I think the drawing really made things clear. Some of the kids even came up to me and apologized.

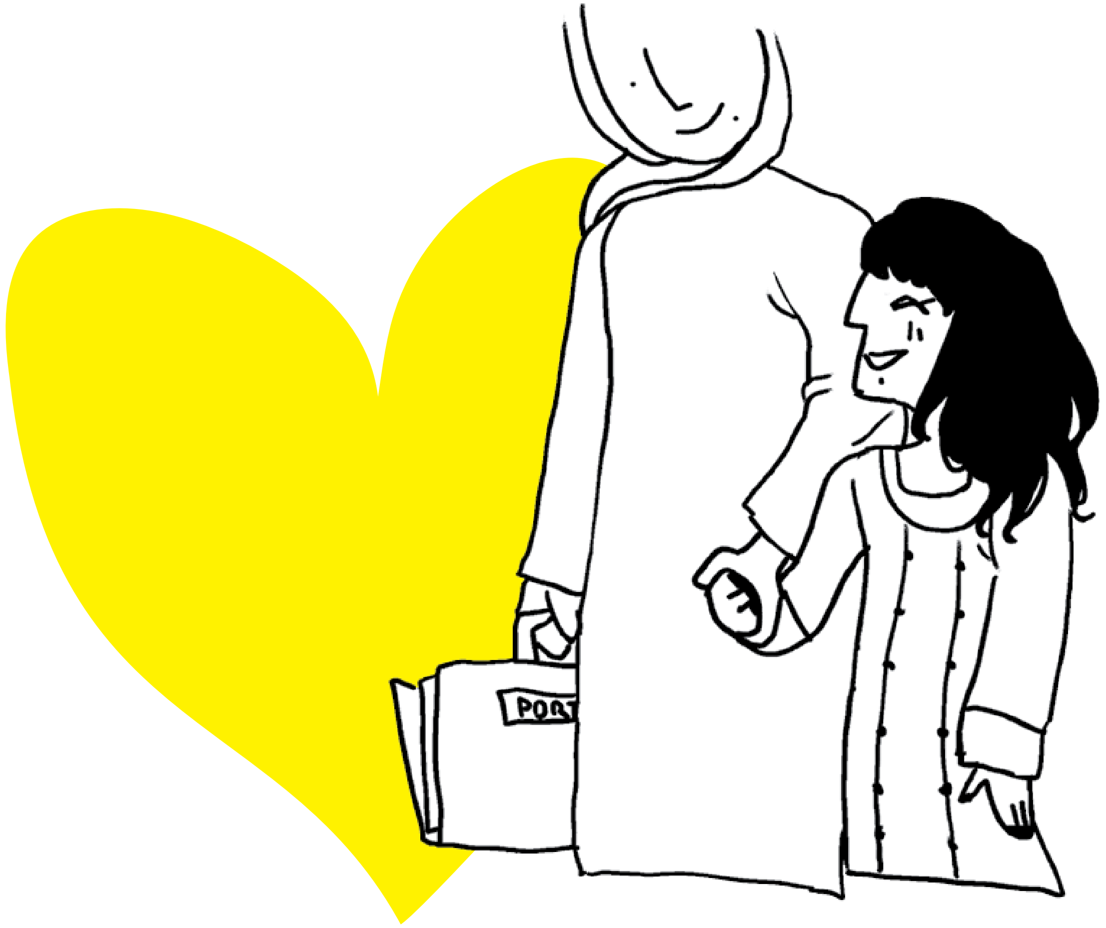


They asked if my mother would come in again to present more of her drawings. I think they liked my mother's drawings. I told them I would ask her, but I was sure that she would be more than happy to.



After that day, my mother came in once a week to give presentations using her drawings. I think we all learned a lot. The drawings really helped make things clear.

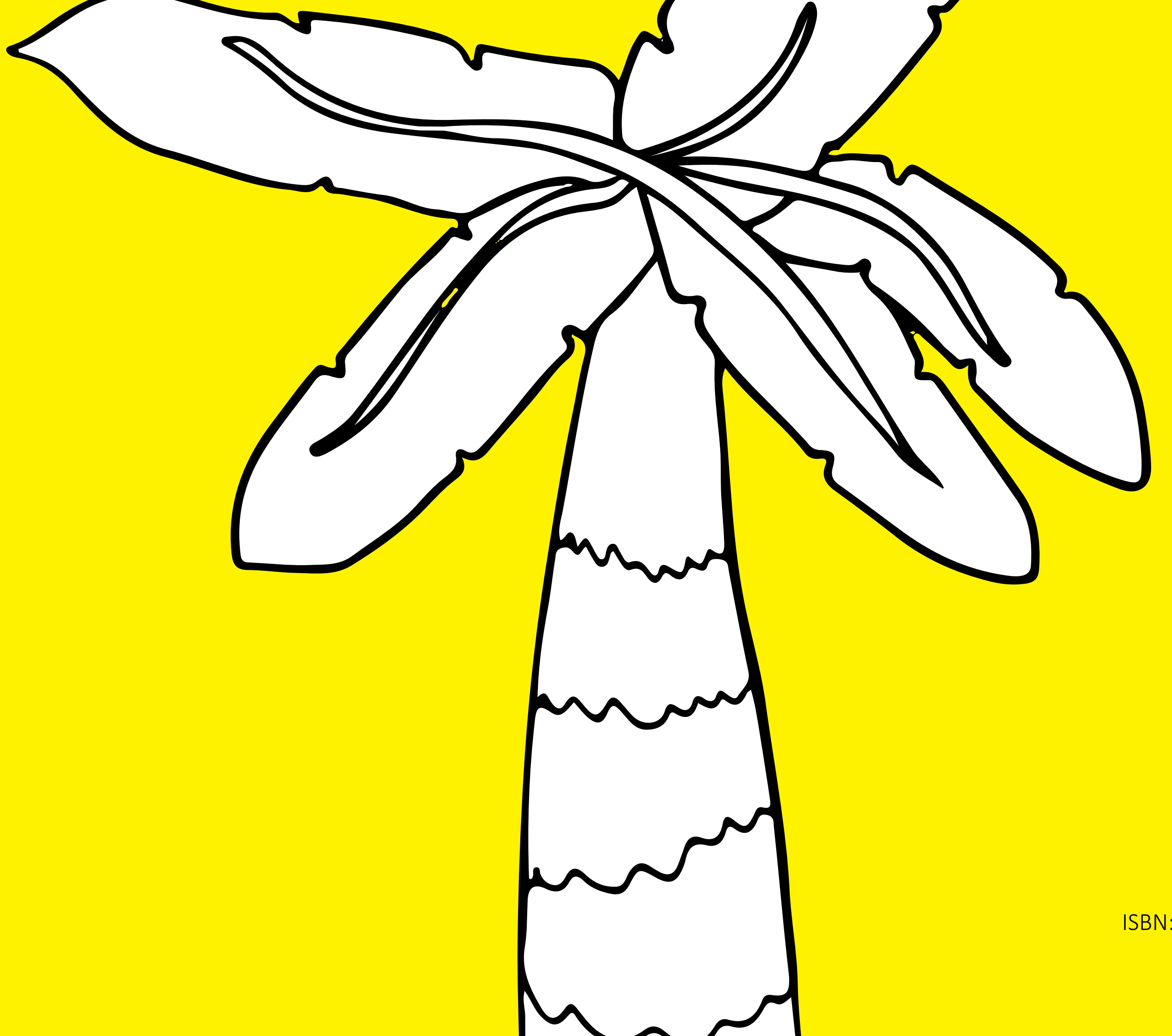
That day, I left school with a good feeling.



THE FOLLOWING WEEK...

"My name is Maitha Al Marri, I'm eighteen, and currently studying Marketing and Entrepreneurship. I've always been interested in writing and drawing, and I almost always prefer to write about things I see.

One aspect I enjoy about writing is the chance it gives me to create situations in which I make all the decisions, and have things go exactly the way I would like them to!"



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